KARABAKH UNDER THE HAMMER

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Category: Opinions

By Bruce Tasker, Yerevan, 28 October 2008

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The issue has however seen almost daily coverage in the media, especially following what some may consider an analogous South Ossetian situation, which led to the five-day August war between Georgia and Russia. The US rushed to the multi-billion Dollar aid of its 'democratic' and now humiliated Georgian ally, whilst Russia eagerly responded to requests from South Ossetia and Abkhazia for Russian annexation and independence from the Georgian aggressor.

Armenia immediately attempted to follow the South Ossetian / Abkhazian independence initiative, and again looked to Russia for support with Karabakhi independence. But Russia, together with the entire international community had consistently rejected Karabakhi independence in favour of Azerbaijani sovereignty. There was however a major consequence of the South Ossetian conflict for Armenia; it was now faced with a renewed urgency to resolve the Karabakh issue. Not to appease the increasingly frustrated US led Minsk Group, but to accommodate Russia's determination to further isolate an already distanced Georgia. Armenia was suddenly faced with an impending Georgian blockade, which increased urgency to open its alternative Western border.

Turkey has consistently stated its conditions for opening its border with Armenia: 1) Resolve Armenia's claim that one and half Armenians perished at the hands of the Turks during the period 1915 to 1919, referred to by Armenia as the first Genocide of the 20th century, but denied by Turkey. For several years, Turkey has pressed for an independent commission to study the matter, but that has consistently been rejected by Armenia; 2) Armenia should withdraw its claims to lands in the eastern part of Turkey; 3) Armenia should reach agreement to resolve the Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan, including an immediate return of the 'surrounding territories' to Azerbaijan, occupied by Armenian forces since the 1994 end of the Karabakhi war.

President Kocharian has for years been preparing to reach agreement with Azerbaijan on the Karabakhi surrounding territories, but has successfully avoided signing on to the Minsk backed conflict resolution package, knowing it would be his political demise. Kocharian knows better than anyone that Azerbaijani resentment from the early 1990's war over Karabakh has grown, and many of the estimated million suffering Azerbaijani refugees and the families of the 3,000 Azerbaijanis lost in sporadic cross-border shootings since the 1994 *'end of hostilities'*, are known to 'hate' Armenians. Moreover, the situation has been aggravated by Armenia's little-publicised policy of moving refugees and under-privileged Armenian families into the surrounding territories. The Minsk Group has until recently recklessly referred to those civilians as 'Occupying Forces'. But Azerbaijan puts the number living in Lachin alone at nearly 20,000, and when recently questioned, Armenia eventually admitted to about 9,000. In February this year, an OSCE fact finding team visited the region at Azerbaijan's request and estimated the number could be as many as 15,000.

The February 2008 Presidential election led to a strongly opposed Sargsyan Presidency, which created considerable tension and unrest in Armenia and resonations throughout the international community, including in Azerbaijan and Turkey. Resolution of the Karabakh conflict was a pre-condition for Turkey to open its border with Armenia; consequently Turkey had no formal diplomatic relations with Armenia, and that is an increasingly frustrating barrier to Turkey's entry into the European Union. Turkey is therefore keen to see the Karabakh problem solved, so seeing the heightened OSCE and Minsk Group attention to the insecure Sargsyan Presidency, Turkey and Azerbaijan moved to consolidate their positions. Kocharian committed to supporting the Sargsyan Presidency, on the understanding that Sargsyan when President, would promptly stand by the domestically unpopular obligation he had successfully avoided and sign the agreement which would return the surrounding territories to Azerbaijan. In turn, Sargsyan made assurances to the Minsk Group and the rest of the international community, which accordingly supported his self-enforced and unpopular Presidency.

Armenia's president Sargsyan was totally committed - to Kocharian, and to the international community to sign on to the Karabakh conflict resolution agreement with Azerbaijan. The rhetoric increased; not only regarding the Karabakh conflict, but also regarding the question of Genocide, so immediately after Sargsyan's April Presidential inauguration, he and his newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs reached out to the various parties. The meetings first took place in secret, but media attention grew and on the 6th September, Turkey's President Gul finally agreed to sample a portion of historical Armenian *'football diplomacy'*.

The Madrid proposal of November 2007 calls for the Governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the De Facto Nagorno-Karabakh Authorities to respect the 1994 ceasefire, refrain from the use of force, halt the rise of defence budgets and cease belligerent and provocative rhetoric directed at the other. That position of course suits Armenia, happy to maintain the status-quo, ad-infinitum. But Azerbaijan is increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress, so with President Ilham Aliyev now overwhelmingly voted in to his second term of office, and bolstered by his multi-billion Dollar military budget, he is determined by any means to return Karabakh and the surrounding territories to Azerbaijani sovereignty and under his control.

Armenia has two basic choices; to return the strategically important *buffer zone'* surrounding territories peacefully to Azerbaijan, or to wait until Azerbaijan is ready to ignore international pleas of peace, and take the territories by force - together with Karabakh. If the peaceful option is chosen, then despite commitments of harmonious coexistence with Azerbaijan and despite promises of security from the OSCE and NATO, there will be an intolerable Azerbaijani threat to Karabakh. Moreover, Azerbaijani refugees returning to their homes in the surrounding territories will forcibly drive out the Armenian civilians, and the Azerbaijani army will be there to provide enthusiastic support. Contrarily, taking Karabakh and the surrounding territories by force would not only seriously damage Azerbaijan's moral superiority, it would cost valuable human and capital assets, and it would threaten important revenues from oil exports, estimated to be $2 billion each month. The problem had however to be solved, so soon Armenia was to either succumb to Minsk and other international pressures, or be ready to fight an unwinnable war.

But peacefully returning the surrounding territories to Azerbaijan would be an unacceptable 'lose-lose' option for Armenia, especially as it is now in a position of dominance, and after having lost 5,000 soldiers in the Karabakh war of the early nineties. For Azerbaijan, a peaceful return of the surrounding territories would seem to be a fundamentally 'win-win' option, although it will inevitably later find itself fighting to contend with the consequential instability of an untenable Armenian / Azerbaijani coexistence.

It is clear that Karabakh and the surrounding territories have considerable strategic importance to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Therefore, the fundamental problem to be resolved was to find a commensurate value, so that Armenia could accept a peaceful

return of the asset to Azerbaijan. Hence, Armenia and Azerbaijan have been in the secret negotiations, bartering to reach agreement on how much Azerbaijan will pay for Armenian capitulation.

The process was however disrupted by the unexpected Georgian conflict, in which Russia came to the defence of its nationals in South Ossetia, which apparently annoyed the US. Armenia suddenly found itself under increased pressure from Russia to speed up the Karabakh resolution process; not for the sake of Azerbaijan and Karabakh, but to facilitate the opening of the Turkish border. Russia was pressing Armenia to support a virtually total blockade of Georgia, by cutting off the electricity supply to the Georgian railway system. On the 10th October, Armenia turned to the US for a way out of what was becoming a very messy situation, and by all accounts, Armenia, America and Russia are now moving forward together, although maybe not altogether in harmony, to finally resolve the Karabakh conflict, with Genocide now a separate and secondary consideration.

Armenia has a fully justified claim to major compensation from Azerbaijan for a peaceful resolution to the conflict; it is needed to cover relocation costs for the Armenians who will be forced to leave the territories and re-settle in other accommodation, many in Yerevan. Money will also be needed to facilitate the operation and to sufficiently compensate the Karabakhi authority in Karabakh, who will need to sign on to the deal. There are also many other questions which need to be answered, but apparently as yet they have not even been asked.

The negotiations have been going on in secret, with the Armenian negotiating parties scheming to keep the compensation package from the rightful beneficiaries. The process is thoroughly corrupt, completely immoral, and has frustrated the process for too many years and for too many reasons, political and financial.

This blog is an effort to expose this betrayal; the sell-out of Karabakh, by its own Karabakhi regime, who now dominate Armenia, and who are determined to reap a multi-billion Dollar reward, at the expense of the peoples of Armenia and of Karabakh and the surrounding territories.

The details will be published as they happen, the deceit, the incomprehensible statements, and the downright lies by the self-indulgent Armenian regime. But hopefully, with the good intentions of other international players in this programme of deceit, we will be able to get to the truth behind the details of this “Karabakh Deal”.

LTP’s 17th October Meeting

By Bruce Tasker, Published in *Khosq* on-line journal, Armenia

My next post was to be entitled “President Sargsyan Threatens Armenia with War”, about how he had worked his way into a dead end and had no other alternative but to put the various parties, especially Armenia under the threat of war with Azerbaijan over Karabakh. But LTP had promised a detailed explanation of his strategy at his meeting of the 17th October, so I waited to see what he had to say. I don’t as yet have the full story, but from what I know, it looks to me that the situation for Armenia might be turning for the better, and it is just as well that I held back.

Firstly, I have to comment on the power of advertising; the LTP camp delivered very simple leaflets to households, providing basic information about the meeting and urging a strong turnout. The result was immediately apparent, by 6.15 pm, when I arrived to the 6.00 pm meeting at the Matenadaran, there was a notably larger crowd than had turned out to the two previous meetings, and through the next hour, the mass continued to grow impressively. By 7.00 pm I had seen what I needed to see, so as I do not understand Armenian, I left and waited for my report on what LTP had to say. The

news seemed at first not to be too encouraging; apparently Serzh was at odds with Russia over Karabakh, and LTP had decided his opposition movement should back away and hold no more meetings until the situation had been resolved. For me, that cast doubts over LTP's sincerity and blew all my theories to smithereens. But after a short period of analysis, and after seeing a surprisingly comprehensive coverage of the meeting on state television, the likes of which Armenia's state TV has never previously shown, things started to fall into place, and I explain as follows:

Serzh had indeed been manipulated into a dead-end by Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia, the latter of which on the one hand had sided with Azerbaijan and the rest of the international community over Karabakh sovereignty; on the other had strong economic ties with Turkey, and on the third was determined to put Georgia in its place for its US-backed bombardment of South Ossetia. Russia was demanding Armenian support to a total isolation of Georgia. That initially meant Armenia's gas supply was to be cut off, as it is supplied by Russia through Georgia. Fortunately, the Iranian gas pipeline had been completed and only needed a few weeks to be brought on stream, so that problem was not hard to solve. The more important Russian demand on Armenia was with regard electrical power for the Georgian railroad system, about which Armenia has kept quiet, but which it supplies. Clearly, if Armenia was to cut off this supply, an alternative route would be needed for the hundreds of thousands of tons of imported goods from the Black Sea, firstly because railroad capacity would be severely restricted, and secondly because Saakashvili would close the Armenian transit route down as a result. Hence, as Armenia could not refuse Russia's demands, Serzh and his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eduard Nalbandian, were dashing from one secret meeting to another in a frantic effort to open the Turkish border, knowing they were about to cut off Georgia's lifeline, but at the same time trying to keep sweet with Georgia by offering to build a new highway to the Black Sea.

The Turkish position on opening the border has been fixed since the end of the Karabakh war in 1994; the Karabakh problem must be resolved and Armenia must withdraw its claims of Turkish Genocide of one and a half million Armenians and its claims to lands in the East of Turkey, including Mount Ararat. Resolution of the Karabakh problem has been overdue for many years, and Serzh could manage to push that through, although with a major domestic backlash. But add capitulation on Genocide to that and Serzh's Presidency was destined to an early and unceremonious termination. Serzh had long been ready to agree on a resolution of the Karabakh problem, for which he was expecting major compensation. But now he was being forced by Russia and Turkey to add Genocide and the lands in eastern Turkey to the equation, which was getting very messy. Russia dangled a new 1,000 megawatt atomic power station in front of him as an incentive; Azerbaijan added a new oil pipeline through Armenia, and Turkey promised free deliveries of goods and materials through the newly opened border, as humanitarian assistance. But Serzh did not need promises of projects and goods, which might or might not materialize; he needed hard cash to revitalize his ailing construction industry and finance re-housing for the thousands of civilians who were to be forced from Karabakh and the surrounding territories - many to Yerevan. And despite claims that Armenia was to cooperate with Georgia to build the new highway to the Black Sea, obviously Saakashvili was not going to tolerate Armenia ganging up with Putin and Medvedev to bring Georgia to its knees.

Nevertheless, Serzh was putting the pieces into place to accommodate his Russian mentors, thinking he had no alternative; Hovik Abrahamyan was brought in as Speaker to quickly push any resolution through Parliament; Kocharian was coming back into politics to deal with the inevitable uproar; and a new decree was formulated to give Serzh

unilateral right to take the Republic to war.

Then, fortunately, a most unlikely party came to the rescue, the outgoing US Vice President Dick Cheney, who received Tigran Sarkissian in Washington on the 10th October. The 17th October timing of LTP's meeting was obviously significant, I thought to follow the 15th October Presidential election in Azerbaijan. But I would now say LTP was waiting the outcome of the Sarkissian / Cheney meeting, which apparently and thankfully turned out beneficial for Armenia and the Caucuses region, although maybe not so acceptable to Russia? At last, after eight years, Cheney might have realized that spending a few hundred million dollars to avoid a needless war is better than spending a few hundred billion dollars to fight one.

That meeting was quickly followed up by a meeting in Yerevan between Serzh Sargsyan and the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Daniel Fried, to discuss the U.S.-Armenia cooperation, regional problems and the Karabakh conflict settlement.

My analysis of the situation is now that LTP has reached agreement with Sargsyan, and together they will finalize agreements on Karabakh, which has long been awaited. But they will not capitulate on Genocide. The result is the Turkish border may not open as Serzh had planned, unless Armenian cooperation with Georgia fails to keep a continual flow of goods and materials along the main Georgian railroad from the Black sea, through Tbilisi and Airum to Armenia. In return, LTP will work with Serzh to try and bring Armenia through the economic difficulties it has been facing since the February Presidential election, with a not inconsiderable financial assistance package from Dick Cheney and the US of A.

I would not hazard to guess where this leaves Kocharian, but for my money, I hope it will be well and truly out in the cold. In any event, this is my personal analysis of yesterday's developments, which gives me some hope that things might be looking up somewhat for the future of Armenia.